

Polit-Barometer

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- Political scandals in the ruling coalition lead to a gradual and constant erosion of electoral support for GERB and the United Patriots. Protests in the last few months have increased public dissatisfaction with the government, and it is obvious from all this that this trend will also continue in the coming months. Confidence in political institutions continues to be at a critically low level, which increases the possibility of substantial shifting in electoral layers as a new factor emerges on the political arena.
- BSP continues to be torn by internal contradictions. Critical attitudes towards party leader Kornelia Ninova intensified after Yordan Michev was appointed editor-in-chief of the party newspaper Duma. An unprecedented petition of fifty members of the National Council of the Party led to the removal of Michev. This result shows that Kornelia Ninova faces ever-stronger internal opposition, and this could negatively affect the party in the upcoming EP elections.
- Scandals in the “United Patriots” led to an expected electoral drain. Conflicts between Volen Siderov and Valeri Simeonov will probably grow worse after the return of the NFSB leader as an MP in the National Assembly. Siderov’s desire to head a general list of the patriotic formations in the European parliamentary elections in which Nikolay Barekov’s “Reload Bulgaria” party would participate does not meet the approval of his coalition partners. The only thing that is preventing the “United Patriots” from breaking down at this stage is their stay in the government.

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1. The Political Situation

1.1 Internal Policy

The government has faced new problems during this quarter, too. The protests of the mothers of children with disabilities went on and even escalated, after Deputy Prime Minister called them “loudmouthed women with supposedly sick children”. This comment was followed by a wave of public discontent and outrage demanding his resignation. Simeonov stated that he would not hand in his resignation and would not apologise, since his words had been taken out of context. Instead of him, Prime Minister Borissov apologised and said that he could not ask Simeonov to resign because that would ruin the coalition. According to the Prime Minister this decision should be taken by the “United Patriots” as per the Coalition Agreement. The leader of “Ataka”, Volen Siderov, who has been in an open conflict with Simeonov for quite some time, also joined in the calls for his resignation. Simeonov, however, was supported by the VMRO leader Krasimir Karakachanov and that led to a stalemate. Valeri Simeonov staying in the position of Deputy Prime Minister seemed impossible, particularly after in the middle of September a new wave of protests swept through the entire country – this time against the high prices for fuel, the increase of third-party insurance premiums and the taxes for old cars. The protesters blocked roads, motorways and border-crossing points – that made the social and political tensions even greater. People from GERB accused BSP of being behind the protests, aiming at political instability and causing a crisis in the country similar to the one of 2013 which resulted in the resignation of the first government of Borissov. BSP denied that they were organising the protests but stated that they supported them because the demands of the citizens were just. The socialists pointed out that the protests are an evaluation of the performance of all the GERB governments over the past nearly 10 years, which have contributed nothing to resolving the problems of poverty and raising the standard of living of the people. The growing protests made the political situation in the country tense, as the protests changed from being against the high fuel prices to being against the govern-

ment, demanding the resignation of the cabinet and a “change of the system”. The government had no move for reducing that tension other than the resignation of Valeri Simeonov. He announced it himself after a Coalition Council meeting. He said that he was resigning due to the ongoing media campaign against him that certain political forces were making use of. Simeonov added that he was not resigning under pressure, but in order not to inflict any damage on the government, which he defined as exceptionally successful. He noted that he did not want to become a millstone for the government and would not be the person to become the reason for the country falling into political instability. After Simeonov’s resignation, the mothers of children with disabilities stopped the protests, which decreased the tension.

The election of a new Deputy Prime Minister in Simeonov’s place led to disagreement within the United Patriots. “Ataka” insisted on closing down that position, and VMRO and NFSB rejected that on grounds that it would destroy the balance, set with the Coalition Agreement. Despite those contradictions, Valeri Simeonov managed to push through the nomination of his Head of the Political Cabinet - Mariyana Nikolova, who had previously worked in various expert positions in the state administration. “Ataka” did not accept the nomination and did not participate in the vote in the National Assembly. Despite that, Nikolova was elected Deputy Prime Minister. After his resignation, Valeri Simeonov returned to Parliament as an MP and this is likely to increase the tension between him and Volen Siderov even more.

The problems for the “United Patriots” did not stop there. The name of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Krasimir Karakachanov and his VMRO party was involved in a corruption scandal after the Chairman of the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad (SABA) Petar Haralampiev was arrested, due to accusations of corruption and trading with Bulgarian citizenship. According to information from the Prosecutor’s Office the amounts demanded from Macedonians in order to receive Bulgarian citizenship had been between 5,000 and 8,000 Euro. The money was collected by go-betweens and was given to the Chairman

of SABA. Petar Haralampiev was nominated by VMRO, although he is not a member of the party. The scandal grew bigger after the former Director of Bulgarian Citizenship Directorate of the Ministry of Justice Katya Mateva accused Karakachanov of funding VMRO from selling Bulgarian citizenship. Mateva said that she had proof of this and that she had submitted that evidence to the State Agency for National Security (SANS). In her words, she sent information about irregularities, but then she became inconvenient and was sacked by Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, then Minister of Justice in the second cabinet of Boyko Borissov. Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov rejected the allegations of Mateva and said that she was sacked because she had slowed down hundreds of files of applicants for Bulgarian citizenship from the Republic of Macedonia. This case will most likely continue to unfold in the coming months.

The institutional war between the President and the majority in power has been going on during this quarter too. The mutual attacks between GERB representatives and the President have become an everyday phenomenon. The attempts of the members of the government and media close to them to discredit the President (who remains the politician of the highest rating in this country) are visible. On the occasion of the start of the democratic change, the President addressed the nation on 10 November, which became yet another reason for new tensions with the people in government from GERB. He said that lobbying and corruption go through the entire system of state government and make it arrogant and fearless of sanctions. According to his words, laws are drafted too often in the interest of business circles and lobbies, not of the citizens. The President pointed out that freedom of speech is a memory of the past, and the media have given up their role of a corrective. According to Radev "The propaganda suffocates pluralism, free thinking gets punished. The well-known mechanisms of a party-state are resurrected. Democratic institutions are atrophying. Decisions are made in the dark, often single-handedly." Radev pointed out that a return of the principles of rule of law and politics focused on the human being is needed, and this could only happen through widespread citizens' involvement

and defending the democratic principles by each and every citizen on a daily basis.

In the middle of November, the European Commission published its report on Bulgaria within the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. The commission states that the country has made significant progress on the recommendations. The assessment with respect of Indicator 1 (Independence of the Judiciary), Indicator 2 (Legal Framework) and Indicator 6 (Organised Crime) is positive and these criteria are regarded conditionally closed. As to Indicators 3 (Continuation of Judiciary Reform), 4 (Corruption in the high levels of government) and 5 (Corruption locally and at borders) significant progress has been made and they are close to being implemented. The European Commission believes that, if this progress is maintained and the country continues its efforts, the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria will be ended by the end of the term of office of the Juncker Commission. The Bulgarian government published a position that this was the most positive report on the country so far, and that it reflects objectively the work done to date. Minister of Justice Tsetska Tsacheva stated that the Commission values highly the way the Supreme Judicial Council operates after the enacted constitutional changes. The SJC works in the spirit of professionalism and cooperation. According to Tsacheva the government has the resolve and the will to implement all the recommendations in full and to close the mechanism next year.

Still, for the first time, the report finds serious problems in the media environment in Bulgaria. The Commission points out that media concentration leads to restricting the access of the public to information and may have a negative impact on the independence of the Judiciary through attacks in some media against specific judges. The report indicates that the Bulgarian media sector features a non-transparent environment and weak implementation of journalistic standards. This reflects on the quality of the public debate and creates a risk of limiting the access of the public to information, due to a restricted number of independent sources.

Prime Minister Boyko Borissov voiced disagreement with the assessment of the media environment. According to him, media in Bulgaria are free to criticise the government, to present different points of view and to report the political process in a pluralist way. Borissov is of the opinion that there is rather some auto-censorship, but that is a problem to be resolved by the media themselves, rather than the government.

BSP published a position that the government should not hurry with a positive evaluation, because the CVM still remains and the fact that European Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker has set a deadline for its abolishment within his term of office does not mean that it will happen. BSP addressed the findings about the worsening media environment, which, according to them, was indicative of the state of democracy in this country.

Most critical in his evaluations was leader of "Yes, Bulgaria" and former Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov, who dubbed the report "grotesque". In his opinion it was about liquidation of monitoring, which was a farewell present to Borissov by European leaders, but in this way, Bulgaria is threatened with becoming the eternal periphery of the EU.

The Chairman of the Supreme Court of Cassation Lozan Panov made a serious assessment of the state of democracy and judiciary in Bulgaria. It strongly differs from the wording of the EC report. He did not agree with the assessment of the independence of the court contained in the report. At an international conference on the role of judges in the public debate on supremacy of law, Panov said that this country has taken the path of autocracy. In his words, the Chief Prosecutor persecutes his adversaries, and no one dares to initiate the introduction of a mechanism for controlling him. Magistrates, starting with himself, as well as their families are subjected to "vicious media and institutional terror that turns their lives upside down". Panov gave an example of how a Chairman of a Court of Appeal is alleged by a judge in abuse of power in order to serve the oligarchy and the ones in power and, instead of punishment, is redeemed by all control bodies. And the judge who

disclosed the misappropriation instead of being congratulated, is currently a defendant in court. In his words, the National Revenue Agency (NRA) is used as a political truncheon for persecution of the inconvenient ones.

Earlier this year Panov was fined for failing to submit an asset declaration to the Audit Office, but only to the Inspectorate of the Supreme Judicial Council. In addition, the new Anticorruption Commission, headed by Plamen Georgiev, summoned Panov to give an explanation, which he did not do. According to Panov, it is illegal to summon him in his capacity of Chairman of the Supreme Court of Cassation, and he defined the actions of the Commission as arbitrary.

The speech of Panov caused a scandal in the judiciary. Many judges defined it as political and unacceptable. The Judges College of the Supreme Judicial Council (headed by Panov himself) also reacted. At a meeting of the Council, 10 of the members demanded from the Chairman of the SCC to say why he believes that all Bulgarian judges are dependent and biased. He was also asked whether he deems appropriate a political discourse to be used as a form of political activity that is specifically banned in the Law on the Judiciary. Lozan Panov refused to answer the questions he was asked.

At the end of November, the country's budget for 2019 was passed. It foresees spending a record BGN 44.5 billion, or 38.2% of GDP. The revenue will amount to BGN 43.86 billion and the deficit - to BGN 600 million. Despite planning a deficit every year, the budget has a surplus already for the third year in a row. The minimum insurance thresholds are increased by 4.7%. The minimum salary will become BGN 560. The maximum insured income ceiling will become BGN 3,000. It is expected that the GDP will reach BGN 116.4 billion. The forecast economic growth is 3.7%. The forecast is for a growth in average annual inflation to 3% from 2.7% this year. The salaries of the people working in education will be raised by 20% in 2019, and of the people working in the public sector - by 10%. Pensions will be increased by 5.7% as of 1 July 2019. The government said that this was the most

generous budget and an example of the sustainable development of Bulgaria over the past years. BSP did not accept this evaluation and said that Bulgaria remains the poorest country in the European Union, and the social gap continues to grow. This is why it is necessary to do away with the flat rate of taxation and move onto progressive tax.

After the accident in Svoge, which cost the lives of 20 people and the resignation of three ministers, a new severe incident put the government on trial. At the beginning of October, after being raped in a brutal assault, the journalist Victoria Marinova, Director of the regional TV station of the city of Russe, was killed. The murder happened in broad daylight on the embankment of Russe while Victoria was jogging, as usual. The social media in Bulgaria suggested that the murder had something to do with her journalistic work. Immediately after the incident, the police and the Office of the Prosecutor stated that they were working on all possible scenarios, but most probably it was an unpremeditated murder, carried out by a psychopath.

The murder provoked a strong international reaction. Reporters without Borders put Victoria Marinova on their list of the victims of their journalistic work. The Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans stated that he was "Shocked by the horrendous murder. Again a courageous journalist falls in the fight for truth and against corruption". Commissioner for Justice Vera Yurova offered help to the Bulgarian authorities with solving the murder case.

Exposed to strong public and international pressure, the Bulgarian authorities managed to find the killer of Victoria, who was apprehended in Germany, where he ran after committing the crime. The 21-year-old murderer, a man of Roma origin, has made a confession. Investigators have found incontrovertible evidence with the presence of DNA material that categorically confirms that he committed the murder.

Prime Minister Borissov has expressed indignation at the reaction of a number of Bulgarian opposition politicians who, in his words, have produced fake news about the murder that has misled a

number of international organizations, as well as Bulgarian partners in the EU. Borissov stressed that not one representative of European institutions and not one foreign embassy had addressed a formal request to the Bulgarian government for information on the case, but they had trusted the fake news spread by the opposition in Bulgaria and non-governmental organizations close to them. Borissov called upon Bulgaria's partners in the future to turn to the official channels to avoid such misunderstandings that ruin Bulgaria's image. Borissov even threatened to reconsider his support for the EPP candidate for European Commission President Manfred Weber, who also has threatened to hurl accusations at Bulgaria.

1.2 Foreign and European policies

The decision was made after a coalition council meeting of the ruling coalition. This situation was reached after pressure from the opposition in the form of BSP and due to the disagreement expressed by the "United Patriots". President Rumen Radev also expressed reservations about the adoption of the Pact in its present form. Initially, Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said the country supports the Pact because it makes a clearer distinction between legal and illegal migrants and in addition mechanisms are created for a systematic approach that regulates the migration process and makes for stricter control.

Following the approval by the EU Council of the Brexit agreement, Prime Minister Borissov expressed regret about the departure of the United Kingdom. According to Borissov, this is a sad day, but the decision of the British must be respected. Borissov stressed that it is very important in the future to continue the close cooperation between the EU and the UK on intelligence-related information and on counter-terrorism. Borissov reassured Bulgarian citizens who live and work on the island that their rights are protected.

The crisis between Russia and Ukraine in the Kerch Strait was met with concern in Bulgaria. Prime Minister Borissov convened a meeting of the Security Council at the Council of Ministers, at

which the situation that had arisen was discussed. The position of the Council that was disseminated states that the actions taken by the Russian Federation are inadmissible. There was an appeal for the two sides in the conflict to exercise restraint and dialogue to aim for a reduction in tension. The position calls on the Russian authorities to immediately release vessels and their crews and to respect the freedom of passage through the Kerch Strait as per the international law in force.

The crisis in the Azov Sea occurred during the visit of Polish President Andrzej Duda to Bulgaria and together with the Bulgarian President, the two had the opportunity to comment on the incident. They called on Russia to de-escalate the tension and release the detained seamen immediately. During the talks, Radev and Duda declared themselves in favour of guaranteeing free civilian navigation. The Polish president announced that if there were international initiatives for new sanctions against Russia, Poland would participate in them.

Two days later, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev again commented on the subject, and this time a new nuance was seen in his position. He pointed out that the risk of escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is real, but Europe should by no means be a hostage to Ukrainian domestic politics. Radev stated that Bulgaria has no interest in the militarization of the Black Sea, which would reflect directly on the country. The president urged all parties to adhere to the norms of international law and not to violate legal limits.

It turned out that one of the Russian seamen retained by the Russians was of Bulgarian descent, but he does not have Bulgarian citizenship. However, the Bulgarian government said it would monitor this case with caution.

1.3 Refugee crisis

In the winter months the migratory pressure on the country is traditionally weak. However, attempts to illegally cross the southern border of the country continue. At the end of November, near Svilengrad, during the search of a minibus, a Bulgarian citizen

was arrested while trying to transport 13 foreigners without identity papers and without a residence permit for the territory of the country. It has been established that the foreign nationals illegally entered the country from Greece. In the interrogation, they said they were citizens of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Among the detainees there are also three children between the ages of 12 and 15.

2. State and development of the major political parties

2.1 Social Democratic and other centre-left parties

2.1.1 BSP

BSP was rocked again at the beginning of October after the decision of the Party's Executive Bureau to change the editor-in-chief of the party Duma newspaper. Yordan Michev was appointed as interim editor-in-chief. MEP Georgi Pirinski and journalist Velislava Dareva drafted a document in which they criticized the party leadership for this decision. The document was signed by 50 people, members of the National Council of the Party, including: Mihail Mikov, Angel Naydenov, Kostadin Paskalev, Krassimir Yankov, Atanas Merdzhanov, Roumen Gechev, Dora Yankova, Georgi Gergov, Georgi Bojinov, Rumen Ovcharov and Petar Mutafchiev.

In the letter it is stated that the change of the editor-in-chief of Duma circumvents the statutes of the party, because such a decision must be taken by the National Council of the Party. This act of leadership is qualified as "an example of the ever-more unpardonably committed practice of completely disregarding the role and powers of the National Council as the governing body of the party. This is a worrying example of replacing the collective leadership principle of the party in the form of its National Council with its President's sole decisions contrary to the statutes." In the document it is also stated that the BSP cannot become a conductor of vicious practices that violate media freedom and destroy the foundations of democracy.

The Michev case was discussed at a meeting of the National Council of the Party, in which matters

resulted in a vote in which the opinion of Ninova's opponents prevailed and he was removed as editor-in-chief. The decision was taken to launch a new procedure for electing the editor-in-chief of the party newspaper. The temporary function will be performed by Ivelin Nikolov.

The events surrounding the Duma newspaper showed that the dissatisfaction with Kornelia Ninova in the BSP has intensified. The main question posed by Ninova's opponents is why BSP does not increase its support among citizens, since the distrust of those in power and GERB grows. According to Rumen Ovcharov, the reasons for this are to be found in Ninova's inability to consolidate the BSP. In his words, she had headed a split party, but not only did she do nothing to unite it, rather she continued to divide it. Ovcharov believes that the success of BSP would come through three consolidations - the party, the left in general and all who are dissatisfied with the GERB government. According to him, the unification of the left also involves working with ABV and Movement 21. However, this requires dialogue and effort, and the party leader must play the leading role in this process.

At the Party Plenary, BSP accepted the rules for the election of candidates for MEPs. Candidates will be eligible to be nominated by local party organizations, which will finally be approved by the National Party Council. Candidates must have authority, high legal culture, a knowledge of the EU institutions, must have experience in politics, and have a command of at least two foreign languages - one of which should be English or French. In determining candidates, the youth representation in the party will be sought and the principle of gender equality will be respected. The process of nominations and the final list will be held from 1 February to 15 March 2019.

BSP took the decision to organize a petition to the European Commission and OLAF to insist on an independent inspection of the quality of Bulgarian motorways in a licensed European laboratory. The debate about the quality of roads in Bulgaria has been exacerbated after the crash near Svoge, in which 20 people lost their lives, leading to the resignations of three cabinet ministers.

The initiator of the European check was Elena Yoncheva. According to Yoncheva, the public is convinced that the construction of roads and major infrastructure projects is a major generator of corruption in the country.

At a meeting of the Sofia City Organization of the BSP it became clear that Ombudsman Maya Manolova is among the names discussed in the BSP as potential mayor of the capital. Manolova, who was among the key figures in the party before becoming ombudsman, enjoys a high public rating. The leader of the Sofia-based organization, Kaloyan Pargov, said that apart from the name of Manolova, other names such as Georgi Svilenski and Elena Yoncheva were also mentioned. Pargov said that the ruling powers of Sofia need a change because the incapacity of the current mayor Fandakova to deal with the problems of the capital, such as polluted air, problems of repair, suspicions of abuse and fixed public procurement, is becoming increasingly apparent. Therefore, the main task of BSP is to offer an alternative to the government in the capital and to propose a candidate capable of winning.

On December 7, 2018 the former president of the BSP, Sergei Stanishev, was reelected for a third consecutive term as president of the Party of European Socialists. The president of the BSP, Kornelia Ninova, declined to participate at the congress of PES because of the content in two resolutions referring to the Istanbul convention and the Global Compact on migration. At the same time, she declared that the delegation of the BSP will firmly support the reelection of Stanishev.

2.1.2 Other centre-left parties

Again in this quarter for ABV priority number 1 is the restoration of the Belene NPP project and accelerated negotiations on the crossing of the "Turk Stream" route through Bulgaria. The suspension of energy projects with Russia was determined by the ABV leader Rumen Petkov as "a political crime". According to him, due to the "obedience" to the European Union and the United States today, Bulgaria faces a "humiliating prospect of import-

ing Russian gas from Turkey and electricity from a Turkish nuclear power plant.” Petkov accused the United States and European partners of Bulgaria of showing double standards - on the one hand, interfering with Bulgarian-Russian joint energy projects but at the same time not interrupting trade relations with Saudi Arabia, despite the accusations that its crown prince ordered the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Former President Georgi Parvanov, a former ABV leader, also commented on the “Turk Stream” issue. According to him, those who opposed the “South Stream” project because Bulgaria would become more dependent on Russia now find themselves with not just Russian but also Turkish dependence.

2.2 Centre-right parties

2.2.1 GERB

At the end of November, for the first time, greater erosion in the electoral support for GERB was observed. Although the party continues to be the leading political force, it is losing its peripheral electorate as a result of the numerous scandals that have been part and parcel of the time in power throughout the year. Protests in the country for various reasons have shown the ever-lower threshold of tolerance of a large part of society. At this stage, the main ruling party has managed to reduce tension by means of resignations or certain concessions to various protesting social groups. This strategy, however, is becoming more and more cracked and cannot have the same effect as it had up until recently. Scandals in the “United Patriots” are harmful not only to the government but also to GERB. It is evident that these conflicts will not fade away, but that they will continue in the future. In this way, GERB runs the risk of permanent electoral erosion, and it cannot be ruled out that it will soon be toppled from the political peak. The fact that the party continues to be the leader in the electoral charts is due to the internal party issues in the BSP, which cannot turn the party into a consolidated force capable of knocking GERB from first place.

GERB parliamentary chairman, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, stated that the government would run a full term of office, despite the current disagreements between the coalition partners. According to Tsvetanov, these disputes are normal and happen in any coalition. There are, however, no significant discrepancies between GERB and the “United Patriots” on the adopted government agenda, and this is the most important thing in his opinion. Tsvetanov pointed out that BSP is not an alternative to governance, but is led by extreme populism, with the aim of destabilizing the country. Tsvetanov yet again accused President Radev of dividing the nation and of coordinating his attacks on the ruling party with BSP. According to Tsvetanov, BSP and President Radev stand behind certain groups of protesters, aiming at provoking social tension, early elections, and forming a caretaker cabinet through which BSP would rule.

On December 3, Boyko Borissov addressed the members and sympathizers of GERB on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of the creation of the party. In it, Borissov highlighted the achievements of the Party - economic progress, the increase of gross domestic product - almost doubled, the increase in incomes of citizens, and the increasing role of Bulgaria in the EU and internationally. Borissov appealed to GERB members and sympathizers to re-evaluate their grass-roots work in order to remove all weaknesses and mistakes in view of the looming elections for European Parliament and the local elections.

At the EPP Congress in Helsinki, GERB supported Manfred Weber’s candidacy for President of the European Commission. At the end of November GERB was accepted as a full-fledged member of the Centrist Democrat International. The decision was taken at a meeting of the General Assembly of the organization held in Cape Verde. The Centrist Democrat International unites Christian Democratic parties from all over the world.

2.2.2 Other centre-right parties

The parties from “Democratic Bulgaria” started their preparations for the upcoming elections to

the European Parliament. Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria nominated the current MEP of the party Svetoslav Malinov for a new term of office. "Yes, Bulgaria" announced that the nomination process in their party would be held through an internal consultation of its members and sympathizers by means of an online mobile phone application. Leader of "Yes, Bulgaria" Hristo Ivanov, said that the final list of "Democratic Bulgaria" would be announced after the signing of a coalition agreement for participation in the elections. At present, the unification includes three parties - DSB, "Yes, Bulgaria" and the "Greens". Although a dialogue started with the other right-wing parties that were part of the Reformist Bloc, UDF and the "Bulgaria for Citizens Movement", the prospects for wider unification on the right wing at this stage remain problematic.

Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria did not take part in the EPP Congress in Helsinki, where Manfred Weber's nomination for President of the European Commission was launched. The reason is that the party has not paid its membership fee for a long time. This was made clear by the representatives of GERB, present at the forum. The Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria did not provide information on the case. This fact is indicative of the difficult financial situation of the party because it does not receive a state subsidy. In fact, none of the smaller right-wing parties receives a subsidy. The reasons for this are the provisions in the Political Parties Act, according to which also parties with over 1% of the votes receive a state subsidy, but this does not apply to coalitions remaining below the threshold for entry into parliament. Unlike the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement and UDF attended the forum, with the UDF supporting Alexander Stubb's candidacy, and the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement supporting that of Manfred Weber.

Former Health Minister in Borissov's second cabinet, Petar Moskov, who was a member of the DSB and the Reform Party, stated that he would soon create a new conservative party that would reach out to other conservative formations. The aim is not just for a general appearance in the European Parliament elections but, above all, to create a truly conservative right-wing project, which is

missing in the country at the moment, in Moskov's words. According to Moskov, the alternative might come with "a right economic policy, with the refusal to continue the liberal narrative of the social and multicultural society and with clear protection of the national interest." As future partners Moskov sees NFSB of Valeri Simeonov and VMRO of Krasimir Karakachanov.

2.3 Centrist parties

2.3.1 MRF

MRF turned out to be one of the biggest political winners in this quarter. The resignation of Valeri Simeonov was one of the goals that MRF had set in the last months. Erosion of electoral support for the "United Patriots" has once again brought MRF into the position of the third political force. This means that MRF can once again turn into a balancing party, on which it would depend what the next parliamentary majority would be. In fact, one of the main arguments by which GERB and the "United Patriots" legitimated their coalition last year was precisely the third place of the "patriots" in the last parliamentary elections.

MRF announced the unification of the main system parties around a program of catching up development for the country and the formation of a program government. MRF sees a lot of common points with the GERB program, so they think it would be easy to find a consensus on the reform priorities and economic development of the country. This requires, however, the removal of the "national-populists" from the government. This is why MRF believes that early parliamentary elections are inevitable. In MRF the opinion is that the country has lost its direction, reforms are not being made, and there is no way out of this crisis other than elections. For example, MRF MP Yordan Tsonev predicted that early parliamentary elections will be held next year. In his words, the resignation of Valeri Simeonov is a victory for civil society. However, this does not solve the underlying problem - the lack of vision and perspective, and the government only generates instability.

2.3.2 "Volya" ("Will" in Bulgarian)

In mid-November a meeting of European nationalist parties entitled "Europe of Nations and Freedom, a New Model for European Citizens" was hosted in Bulgaria, of which the leader of "Volya" Veselin Mareshki was the host. Also present in Sofia were Marin Le Pen, leader of the National Assembly in France, Tomio Okamura, chairman of the Czech party "Freedom and direct democracy", former leader of the Belgian Flemish Party "Vlaams Belang" and current leader of the "Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom" Gerolf Annemans. "Volya" will take part in the upcoming elections for European Parliament as part of the extreme right-wing group in Europe - a transformation that is not surprising in view of the opportunistic behaviour of Veselin Mareshki over the past year. During the forum, Mareshki stated that Bulgarian citizens through "Volya" will participate in the saving of Europe. According to him, European nationalists are called to save Europe from the dictatorship of Brussels. According to Mareshki, the current EU model is exhausted and needs to be replaced by a union of nations where national sovereignty will be respected.

Mareshki and Le Pen have criticized EU sanctions against Russia, but have also opposed NATO. Marin Le Pen stated that the opinion of the people about the future of NATO should be sought. In her words, this is an organization created at the beginning of the Cold War that has played out its part. Mareshki sided with Le Pen's position and said a referendum should be called in Bulgaria for the Bulgarian people to determine whether the country should continue to be a member of the Alliance. The leaders of the parties presented at the forum united around the idea that the EU is threatened with Islamization, and the migratory wave needs to be curtailed by closing the borders of the Union.

2.4 Nationalist parties

2.4.1 "United Patriots"

Scandals in the United Patriots led to a decline in support for the coalition parties and they face the

challenge of being left out of parliament if there are any early elections. Controversies between individual leaders continue. Volen Siderov was among the harshest critics of Valeri Simeonov, demanding his resignation. Siderov went on to say that Krasimir Karakachanov also had to resign. According to Siderov, the three leaders would thus be able to focus on parliamentary work and stop the decline in support that has been observed over recent months. Krasimir Karakachanov stated that he was tired of being a peacemaker in the coalition. In his words, the constant scandals are destructive to the coalition, and it is very difficult for party members to maintain the positions they had a year earlier.

The trend towards unity among the patriots and the search for alternative routes and new coalition formulas in view of the forthcoming EP elections in May 2019 is increasingly visible.

At the beginning of October, "Ataka" filed an application for membership in the "Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe" (ACRE). The invitation to "Ataka" came from MEP Nikolay Barekov, who is one of the European Parliament's Conservatives and Reformists. Siderov and Barekov announced they expect the Bulgarian Conservatives to achieve a result with 4 representatives in the European Parliament. However, it would be necessary to unite all the conservative and patriotic forces in the forthcoming elections. Barekov and Siderov turned to VMRO and NFSB to join the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists. According to Siderov, the VMRO leader has given his consent to joint appearance of the elections, but Valeri Simeonov stated he would not participate in a coalition with Barekov.

At the beginning of October, ACRE chairman Jan Zahradil visited Sofia at the invitation of Nikolay Barekov. Zahradil expressed confidence that Conservatives in Bulgaria could make a significant contribution to expanding the presence of representatives of this political family in the European Parliament. At the same time, however, Zahradil pointed out that he disagreed with the thesis of "Ataka" regarding the occupation of the Crimea, which, in his words, would give rise to problems

for membership of the party. Zahradil stated that in order to be accepted as a party member, it must obtain the unanimous agreement of all other ACRE member parties. Barekov pointed out that he sees Siderov as the leader of the process of unification and even head of the election list for European Parliament.

The question as to who should head the “United Patriots” list for the European elections is turning out to be one of the most controversial issues. Volen Siderov’s claim to lead the list is met with by disapproval of his other partners from VMRO and NFSB. Angel Djambazki of VMRO, currently a MEP, also has ambitions for a new term in the European Parliament. He suggested that the list should be determined after internal elections in the parties. This was rejected by NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov, however. In his view, this idea would only lead to even greater disagreements and tensions between the parties.

2.5 Positions of Political Parties on Foreign and European Policies

NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov said it would be best for Bulgaria if it were confined to a common position of the European institutions on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia in the Kerch Strait. Simeonov spoke cautiously about the idea of the creation of a NATO Black Sea fleet suggested by Romania. He pointed out that Bulgaria should not be at the forefront of the states that are calling for the creation of such a fleet, because it would be accepted as an act of aggression by Russia, and this could increase the risks that the country faces.

NFSB MPs did not support the changes in the Energy Strategy, which parliament adopted in connection with the decision for Gazprom’s “Turk Stream” to pass through Bulgaria. Valeri Simeonov said he could not support the construction of a gas pipeline in which only Russian gas flowed. He expressed concern that this could cause the EU to sanction Bulgaria for violation of the Third Energy Package. According to Simeonov, no one could guarantee that this expensive gas transmission network would make a profit for Bulgaria if,

for example, for political reasons, Russia stopped gas supply. Unlike NFSB, all other parliamentary parties have welcomed the possibility of the “Turk Stream” passing through Bulgaria and supported the government, which was tasked with launching negotiations on the implementation of the project.

3. Public opinion

Government scandals in recent months have led to some change in electoral attitudes. This has been observed by all sociological agencies. The difference between GERB and BSP is continually decreasing, with this being due to erosion in support of the ruling party, while BSP maintains its current levels of support. The constant conflicts in the “patriots” as well as the scandal caused by the words of Valeri Simeonov to mothers of disabled children have led to a decline in the support of the “United Patriots”, who are on the verge of entering parliament and have been overtaken by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms as the third political force. Among the small right-wing parties, the previous levels of confidence remain constant, which at this stage does not give them a chance of entering parliament.

A Trend survey conducted in mid-November shows that the gap between GERB and the BSP is slightly more than 1%. 21.2% would vote for GERB, and 19% would vote for BSP. MRF ranks third with 6.5% and “United Patriots” remains fourth with 4.2%. “Volya” has no chance of joining parliament, since only 1.4% of the electorate would vote for Veselin Mareshki’s party. “Democratic Bulgaria” remains with 1.9% support.

4. Main Conclusions and forecasts

1. Political scandals in the ruling coalition lead to a gradual and constant erosion in electoral support for GERB and the “United Patriots”. Protests in the last few months have increased public dissatisfaction with the government, and it is clear that this trend will continue in the coming months as well. Confidence in political institutions continues to be critically low, which reinforces the possibili-

ty of substantial shifting in the electoral layers as a new factor emerges on the political arena. As the European parliamentary elections approach, political polarization will intensify, along with the opposition's attempts to trigger early parliamentary elections. This process will be accompanied by new coalition configurations not only in the right space but also among nationalist formations.

2. BSP continues to be torn by internal contradictions. Critical attitudes towards party leader Kornelia Ninova intensified after Yordan Michev was appointed editor-in-chief of the party newspaper Duma. The unprecedented petition of fifty members of the National Council of the Party led to the removal of Michev after a decision of the National Council. This result shows that Kornelia Ninova faces stronger internal opposition, and this could negatively affect the party in the upcoming EP elections. These will also be a major test for Ninova's future as party leader. In spite of the protests and the problems in government, BSP did not manage to increase electoral support and expand its periphery. Radical opposition talks lead to the consolidation of the hardcore electorate but repel wavering voters. Therefore, BSP faces the main challenge of finding the right balance in its political behaviour, so as to avoid repeating the mistakes of the previous election campaign. Consolidation of the left-wing space and finding new alleys for cooperation between the BSP and the smaller left-wing formations at this stage seems unlikely, although the EP elections provide such an opportunity.

3. Over the past month, a decline in support for GERB has been observed. The scandals provoked by the smaller of the coalition partners also reflect on GERB. The party has ruled apart from a brief interruption since 2009, inevitably leading to it becoming somewhat jaded. In recent months, GERB has been forced to suppress scandals, primarily through crisis PR, but the government is losing focus and direction. Despite maintaining good macroeconomic performance, GERB has not brought some important reforms to a con-

clusion and risks finding itself in a situation of permanent electoral erosion.

4. Scandals in the "United Patriots" have led to an expected electoral drain. Conflicts between Volen Siderov and Valeri Simeonov are likely to deepen after the return of the NFSB leader as a member of the National Assembly. Siderov's wish to head a general list of the patriotic formations in the European Parliamentary elections involving Nikolay Barekov's "Reload Bulgaria" party does not meet the approval of his coalition partners. The only thing that prevents the "United Patriots" from breaking down at this stage is their stay in the government. But this is not likely to be enough to preserve their unity in the medium term. Probably, as early as in the European elections, "Ataka", NFSB and VMRO will take different paths.

5. At present, smaller right-wing parties have no chance of getting into parliament in possible early parliamentary elections. "Democratic Bulgaria" is the formation that claims to be becoming a major entity to unite the fragmented liberal urban right wing. Prospects for wider unification on the right remain unclear, especially after Petar Moskov's request to create a new right-wing conservative party, which would be an alternative to the liberal line offered by "Democratic Bulgaria".

6. MRF has replaced the "United Patriots" as the third political force and is thus on its way to regaining its role as the counterbalance in a future parliamentary configuration. The party is increasingly advocating the argument for the necessity of an expert government to unite around a national program for accelerated development of the country.

7. Despite the attempts of "Volya" to present a new image, seeking legitimacy among the family of nationalist formations in Europe, the party is becoming increasingly marginalized politically and electorally, and this appears to be a lasting trend that it will be difficult to reverse.

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